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Allen Dulles' Work Can't Be Judged Now

Appraisals of the feats and failures of Allen W. Dulles are now in order. The first career chief of the Central Intelligence Agency will soon be retiring. For the nation's sake we must hope that the best of the imprinted appraisals of the man's work will be incomplete, inaccurate and ill-balanced. Surely Mr. Dulles wants it that way.

A spy agency can lose more usefulness through disclosures of its successes than through publicity about its failures. To be underestimated by the public would probably help such an agency in its work. What counts is the good opinion of a very few well-informed persons in authority. As for the public, it might be best of all if the agency were almost forgotten.

These truisms about espionage and efforts to thwart other nations' espionage run contrary to all our ideas about public opinion, promotion and effective leadership in office. They sound un-American. Effective modern spying probably is un-American, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. Yet we have had persons to perform this duty for us in earlier struggles —probably more than the general reader knows about, even now.

We need much more spying and better spying in the future. Much of this, as it has been for years, will be systematic analysis of industrial and scientific material which a nation must publish for its own guidance. But we can't know about that, either.

We can't know how much information the CIA had on the subject, or what interpretations it made, or how our top leaders used that information. We won't know for a long time after the struggle, anyway. So Allen W. Dulles can't really be judged at this time, a risk he understood when he took the job.